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ABSTRACT

Arguing that the contemporary cultural model of socially appropriate mothering takes the form of an ideology of "intensive mothering," this book explores the contradictions manifested by pressures on mothers to expend time, energy, and resources on raising children when so many women are in the workplace, and by the unselfish nurturing that guides mothers in a culture motivated by self- interested gain. The book draws on three types of data: the history of ideas about child rearing, a textual analysis of best-selling contemporary child-rearing manuals, and interviews with mothers. Chapter 1 of the book explores a disagreement between a mother and her boss in order to lay out the problem addressed by the remainder of the book. Chapter 2 charts the historical construction of contemporary ideas regarding child rearing, childhood, and mothering. Chapter 3 examines the approaches of the three top-selling authors of contemporary child-rearing manuals: Dr. Benjamin Spock, Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, and Penelope Leach. The remaining chapters present the words of contemporary mothers. Chapter 4 explores diversity among mothers, examining differences among individual women as well as the more systematic differences that follow from social-class background. Chapter 5 moves from differences to similarities, outlining the central tenets and overall logic of appropriate child rearing as it is elaborated by mothers themselves. Chapter 6 considers the important question of how paid working mothers and stay-at-home mothers make sense of their respective positions, showing that both groups share a deep commitment to the ideology of intensive child rearing. Chapter 7 concludes the book, attempting to untangle the social roots of the paradoxical persistence of the ideology of intensive mothers. This chapter argues that the ideology of intensive mothering is protected and promoted because it holds a fragile but nonetheless powerful cultural position as the last best defense against what many people see as the impoverishment of social ties, communal obligations, and unremunerated commitments. (Includes extensive notes, by chapter, and a 369-item bibliography.) (HTH)

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